

COVID-19: Five Helpful Responses for Families

Posted on March 18, 2020 by Becky Bailey

Kids don't say, "Beloved parent, I'm having difficulty in my daily life. I don't fully understand what's happening, I miss my friends, I'm afraid someone I know is going to die and it feels like life will never be normal again." Instead, they throw tantrums, become clingy, sulk, backtalk, refuse to do anything you ask, wet the bed, pick fights with siblings and suddenly forget how to do basic tasks they mastered years ago.

Whew! Let's step back, take a few deep breaths and learn a little about your child's brain: Safety is the brain's most basic need, followed closely by connection. When we feel unsafe or disconnected, our brains downshift from the higher centers responsible for learning and problem solving, to the lower reactionary centers. That's why all those challenging behaviors are popping up, and why a minor frustration is now Titanic in size.

We can help children (and ourselves) by creating a sense of safety, connecting, and cultivating a new sense of normal with these five tips:

1. Young children co-regulate with trusted adults and older children feed off our internal states. Our calm nurtures their calm. Our distress increases their distress. Check in with yourself. How are you faring? Practice active calming by taking three deep breaths when you feel yourself becoming frustrated, fearful, angry or desperate. Seek out activities and call people who calm you. Limit your news intake, social media and other sources of stress. Be a [Safe Place](#) for your child.

Acknowledge your feelings and your children's. Know that children's fits and meltdowns aren't just about the momentary point of frustration that triggered them; they're about the underlying state of uncertainty they're experiencing. Offer them calm, comfort and reassurance with deep breathing and phrases like, "You're safe. You can handle this. We'll get through this together." Encourage them to name and manage their feelings. And forgive yourself when you're the one who's had the fit or meltdown.

Helpful Free Resources:

- Printable: [I Can Handle Scared Social Story](#)
- Printable: [Mi Libro: yo puedo con mi miedo](#)
- Printable: [How Do You Feel Chart](#)
- Webinar: [The Safe Place at Home with Nicole Mercer](#)

- Webinar: [Seeing Conscious Discipline in the Home with Nicole Mercer](#)

2. Focus on safety and connection. The brain functions optimally when it feels both safe and connected. Children need to know that life is going to be different and that you will find a new normal together. Make safety and connection your top priority, especially in the first days; you can always add academics, chores and such later.

If you don't already practice active calming, start! Conscious Discipline uses S.T.A.R., Balloon, Drain and Pretzel breathing, and there are dozens of other websites with helpful breathing games and yoga for kids.

Build extra togetherness into your day. For young children, this might look like extra reading or playing blocks together. For older children, it might be doing a puzzle or playing a favorite video game together. Notice whatever your child is doing and join in their play. Go outside and play. Get down on the floor and play. Wrestle. Giggle. Snuggle. Hug, high five and enjoy. Connection isn't just good for your mood, it builds neural connections in your child's brain and increases cooperation (and who couldn't use a little of that right now?).

Age-appropriate information increases safety; "You're fine" does not. Information will help reassure and soothe children's fears, but it's important to know when enough is enough. Explain to children why life is different using the simplest terms possible. Answer their questions honestly, without offering too much detail or overwhelming them with information. Watch the news in private rather than having it running in the background all day. Limit social media for your children and yourself. Focus on statements like, "You're safe. You can handle this. We will get through this together," instead of dismissing with comments like, "Everything's okay," or "It's not something you need to worry about."

Helpful Free Resources:

- Printable: [Why Can't I Go to School? Social Story](#) (6 languages)
- Printable: [Safe Place Breathing Icons](#)
- Printable: [Breathing S.T.A.R.](#)
- Printable: [Four Elements of Connection](#)
- Printable: [Story Hand](#)
- Photo and video [examples of breathing techniques](#) in Shubert's School

3. Create your new normal. The brain thrives on predictable patterns. Our daily and weekly patterns have been turned upside down without warning. Creating a new normal begins with a new daily routine. Families with older children can work together to co-create your new daily schedule (co-creating gives children a way to exert some control over the situation), while parents of younger children will create the schedule for them. Plan it, draw it, label it, post it somewhere obvious and refer to it often so children know what to expect.

A successful daily schedule might be: Wake up, get dressed, eat breakfast, project time, outside time, lunch, free play, rest time, family time, dinner, wash/brush, PJs, read, bed. The activities during "project time" could vary between creative play (art, dress up, building blocks),

academics, gardening, household projects, or exploring online resources like museum tours, dance classes or storytelling sites. Be certain your schedule has ample opportunities for play. Creating a rhythm to your days and knowing what to expect next cultivates a sense of safety.

Helpful Free Resources:

- “How-to” and [examples of routines](#) in [Shubert’s Home](#)
- “How-to” and [examples of schedules](#) in Shubert’s Home
- Webinar: [Three Vital Steps to Successful Routines with Kim Jackson](#)

4. Give children ways to contribute. Contribution lights up the reward centers of the brain and releases feel-good chemicals like dopamine and serotonin. Verbally highlight the way your family is helping your community and hospitals by staying home. Draw pictures and make cards to mail, leave on friends’ and neighbors’ doorsteps, or drop off at a nursing home.

Provide lots of little ways for children to be helpful at home and offer authentic praise for their helpfulness. The contribution needs to be voluntary, not coerced, in order to release those feel-good brain chemicals. Ask, “Do you want to make my coffee this morning?” If the answer is, “No,” let it go. If the answer is, “Yes,” show them how to make coffee and then rave about how helpful it was for them to brew it.

Helpful Free Resources:

- “How-to” and [examples of Ways to Be Helpful Board](#) in Shubert’s Home
- Examples of [focusing on safety and helpfulness during/after a crisis](#)

5. Shift toward seeing the best. Notice your inner and outer speech. Are you “stuck at home” with your kids, or do you have an opportunity to connect with family and keep the community safe while you work from home? Are you “stuck at work,” or are you helping to keep the community running by staffing hospitals, grocery stores and other important functions in spite of the risks? Are selfish people hoarding things, or are frightened people trying to make sure their families have enough? Are government officials doing too much/not enough/stupid things, or are they doing the best they can with constantly changing information about an unexpected, unprecedented threat? Should those idiots know better than to go out, or are there millions of individuals who are helping each other by staying home to slow the spread of the virus?

It’s easy to get caught up in what’s going wrong. Instead, make an effort to consciously shift toward helpfulness. Use your words as a spotlight to illuminate the behaviors you want to see more of and aspects you find helpful amidst the fear. The more positive aspects you discuss around your children, the more they are able to see the best in the situation. The more you notice and verbalize children’s helpful actions, the more helpful they will become. Shifting your perspective from what you don’t want to what you do want paves the way for a healthier internal state for you and your children.

Helpful Free Resources:

- Webinar: [Tools for Your Parenting Toolbox- The Power of Perception and Power of Attention with Abbi Kruse](#)
- Printable: [Shubert's Heart-Shaped Glasses](#)

For 20+ years, “We’re all in this together” has been one of the basic tenets of Conscious Discipline. It seems ironic that a virus that requires social distancing to slow its spread has drawn our attention to how intimately connected we truly are as friends, neighbors, communities and nations.

Conscious Discipline offers a wealth of social-emotional information online to help you during this challenging time. Some of the items are purchasable, but in keeping with our belief that we’re all in this together, many of our [webinars](#), [podcasts](#), [videos](#), [printables](#), [articles](#) and [other items](#) are absolutely free for you to use.

We hope these resources are helpful. We are holding you in our hearts and wishing you well during this challenging time.

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